

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ARA-06 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 SAJ-01 EB-07 TRSE-00 OMB-01 (ISO) W

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R 192100Z SEP 75

FM AMEMBASSY PARIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3327

INFO AMEMBASSY LISBON

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY MADRID

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY BERN

AMCONSUL BORDEAUX

AMCONSUL LYON

AMCONSUL MARSEILLE

AMCONSUL MARTINIQUE

AMCONSUL NICE

AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, FR

SUBJECT: RENEWED INTEREST IN REGIONAL REFORM

SUMMARY. FRANCE IS CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING A ROUND OF RENEWED INTEREST IN REGIONAL REFORM. CORSICA AND THE DEPRESSED ECONOMIC SITUATION APPEAR TO BE BEHIND THE PHENOMENON. THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE ABLE TO RIDE OUT THE CONTROVERSY, AT LEAST OVER THE SHORT RUN. EVENTUALLY, HOWEVER, SOME REFORMS BOWING TO THE REGIONAL CONCEPT MAY BE NECESSARY TO DEFUSE THE ISSUE. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE ISSUE OF REGIONALISM VERSUS CENTRALIZATION IS OF COURSE AS OLD AS FRANCE ITSELF. FROM HUGUES CAPET TO CHARLES DE GAULLE, NATIONAL LEADERS HAVE WRESTLED WITH THE QUESTION OF HOW BEST TO DIVIDE POWER PREROGATIVES BETWEEN PARIS AND THE REGIONS. DE GAULLE HIMSELF RETIRED FROM THE PRESIDENCY AFTER SEEING HIS OWN REGIONAL REFORM PROPOSALS VOTED DOWN IN 1969.

2. TWO FACTORS APPEAR TO HAVE TRIGGERED THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY. THE MORE DRAMATIC OF THESE, OF COURSE, IS CORSICA. VIOLENCE IN ALERIA AND ELSEWHERE WAS FUELED IN PART BY THE FEELING THAT THE ISLAND IS BEING RUN LIKE A COLONY FROM PARIS. THE FALTERING ECONOMY AND THE DEBATE OVER GISCARD'S PROPOSALS FOR A "RELANCE" HAVE ALSO PLAYED A ROLE BY FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE EXISTING CENTRALIZED ECONOMIC DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE.

3. OPINION POLLS CONFIRM PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE ISSUE. A RECENT SOFRES SOUNDING INDICATED ONLY 13 PERCENT OF THE PUBLIC HOLDING NO OPINION, WITH 60 PERCENT FAVORING INCREASED "REGIONALISM", AND 27 PERCENT AGAINST THE CONCEPT. THE POLLS ALSO REVEAL THAT THE PUBLIC LAYS AT LEAST PART OF THE BLAME FOR LACK OF PROGRESS IN THE AREA AT THE GOVERNMENT'S DOORSTEP. AN IFOP POLL PUBLISHED THIS WEEK DESCRIBES 48 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION AS SEEING NO IMPROVEMENT IN THE PICTURE SINCE GISCARD TOOK OFFICE.

4. POLITICALLY, THE CONTROVERSY REVEALS STRANGE BEDFELLOWS. SERVAN-SCHREIBER AND CHABAN-DELMAS PREDICTABLY ARE PLAYING THE ROLE OF LEADING APOSTLES FOR THE REGIONAL FAITH. IN THEIR EFFORTS, HOWEVER, THEY ARE BEING JOINED BY THE LIKES OF MICHEL JOBERT AND SOCIALISTS SUCH AS BRETON DEPUTY LOUIS LE PENSEC. SIMILARLY, AND AGAIN AS WOULD BE EXPECTED, THE LEADING JACOBINS DEFENDING CENTRALIZATION HAIL FROM THE GAULIST CAMP. THEY INCLUDE MICHEL DEBRE, PIERRE MESSMER AND, PERHAPS TO A LESSER DEGREE, PRIME MINISTER JACQUES CHIRAC. BUT LIKE SERVAN-SCHREIBER AND COMPANY, THE OPPONENTS OF DECENTRALIZATION ARE ALSO RECEIVING AT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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LEAST TACIT SUPPORT FROM AN UNUSUAL QUARTER -- THE COMMUNISTS.

5. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND OF ABNORMAL POLITICAL CLEAVAGES, THE ISSUE OF REGIONALISM COULD PROVE PARTICULARLY EMBARRASSING TO PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING. COMMENTATORS HAVE BEEN QUICK TO REMIND THE PRESIDENT OF HIS STATEMENTS DURING THE 1974 CAMPAIGN CALLING FOR

DECREASED CENTRALIZATION. PERHAPS NOTING THE PRESIDENT'S
DILEMMA, THE COMMUNISTS HAVE CALLED FOR A VOTE OF
CONFIDENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT IF THE ISSUE IS NOT PLACED
ON THE AGENDA, AND VOTED UPON, DURING THE OCTOBER
PARLIAMENTARY SESSION.

6. COMMENT: OVER THE SHORT RUN AT LEAST, GISCARD
SHOULD BE ABLE TO RIDE OUT THE STORM. REGIONALISM AS A
CONCEPT REMAINS ONLY VAGUELY DEFINED; IT WILL BE
DIFFICULT FOR ANY SUBSTANTIAL GROUPING IN PARLIAMENT TO

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AGREE ON EXACTLY WHAT MEASURES ARE NECESSARY FOR ITS IMPLEMENTATION. FOR EXAMPLE, THE COMMUNISTS, WHILE CALLING FOR FINANCIAL AUTONOMY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, ARE DEAD SET AGAINST ANY WEAKENING OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT'S ULTIMATE PREROGATIVES. THE SOCIALISTS, WHO AGREE WITH THEIR UNITED LEFT PARTNERS ON THE ISSUE OF INCREASING LOCAL FINANCIAL AUTONOMY, HAVE URGED THAT REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES BE GIVEN AN ABSOLUTE VETO POWER OVER NATIONAL URBAN POLICY.

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7. OVER THE LONGER RUN, HOWEVER, SOME REFORMS BOWING TO THE REGIONAL CONCEPT WOULD SEEM CLEARLY NECESSARY. AN UPTURN IN THE ECONOMY MAY DEFUSE CHARGES THAT PARIS HAS MISHANDLED THE SITUATION AND THAT SOME SORT OF MORE DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM COULD HAVE AVOIDED ITS MISTAKES. NEVERTHELESS, PARTISANS OF INCREASED AUTONOMY FOR CORSICA AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, BRITTANY AND THE BASQUE REGION, WILL KEEP REGIONAL ISSUES IN THE HEADLINES. MOREOVER, MAYORS OF LARGE CITIES SUCH AS STRASBOURG, FINDING THEMSELVES UNABLE IN THEIR STRAINED FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES TO COPE WITH INCREASING DEMANDS FOR LOCAL SERVICES, CAN BE EXPECTED TO KEEP UP PRESSURE FOR REGIONAL REFORM. SUCH EVENTUAL REFORM NEED NOT BE EXTENSIVE, IN OUR OPINION. BUT SOME STEPS TOWARD DECENTRALIZATION, AT LEAST IN THE FINANCIAL AREA, WILL PROBABLY BE REQUIRED IF THIS LATEST CYCLE OF DEMANDS FOR REGIONAL REFORM IS TO SUBSIDE. END COMMENT.
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